

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IS CALLED TO ACT THIS TISHA B'AV FOR KLAL YISRAEL

The Jewish future is at stake

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PICTURE yourself at your child's bar or bat mitzvah in Jerusalem. The sun is shining, ancient stones in the background, relatives and friends gather around the reading table as the young person reaching the age of mitzvot stands with tallit on, yad in hand and reading the ancient and holy words of our Torah. Suddenly, a gang of teenagers surrounds your group, taunting you, whistling and drowning out your prayer, shouting "Nazi" at the child.

This is what happened to Seth Mann at his bar mitzvah just one month ago. What will he remember? Will he be traumatised? What will be his feelings about Israel?

This was not an isolated incident. Such occurrences have, unfortunately, been happening with increasing frequency. Would it even cross your mind that the perpetrators of such antisemitic incidents could be Jewish? In fact, the gang was composed of Charedi (ultra-Orthodox) boys instructed by their rabbis to disrupt religious services in the name of God and Torah!

Israeli police and security forces have mostly been "standing on the sidelines", failing to enforce the law that stipulates that it is illegal to interrupt peaceful prayer at a holy site, with a punishment of up to three years in prison.

Jewish communal leaders need to condemn these hateful actions, particularly on Tisha b'Av.

Dr Deborah Lipstadt, US ambassador for the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, tweeted, "If this had happened anywhere else it would be labelled antisemitism." Acting Prime Minister Yair Lapid remarked, "Israel is the only (Western) country in the world in which Jews don't have freedom of worship."

We can, indeed, be our worst enemy, and this is one of the primary messages of the saddest day of the Jewish year, Tisha b'Av. As we read in Tractate Yoma: "... during the Second Temple period [Jews] were engaged in Torah, mitzvot and acts of kindness, [so] why was the Second Temple destroyed? It was destroyed due to the fact that there was senseless hatred ... They were wicked; however, they put their faith in the



Ultra-Orthodox youths interrupt a bar mitzvah ceremony at the egalitarian section of the Western Wall on June 30, 2022. Photo: Laura Ben-David

Holy One, Blessed be He."

Is this not exactly what we are seeing today? Religious Jews, who, ostensibly, have a deep faith in God and are committed to a life of Torah and mitzvot, are zealously attacking other Jews out of hatred and disdain for different Jewish practices. They are filled with the arrogance of their own piety and certainty that God calls on them to perform such hateful actions.

It was just last Tisha b'Av that the egalitarian service at the Masorti Kotel (Ezrat Israel) was overrun by Jewish protesters, who set up a mechitzah (a divider between men and women) and pushed out egalitarian worshippers from their own dedicated prayer space. These "protesters" displayed the very sinat chinam (baseless hatred) that led to the destruction of the Second Temple.

Will history repeat itself? Will the divisions among the Jewish people again lead to our demise? It could if we don't act, so we must act decisively as Am Echad – One People.

In that spirit, Australian Jews can be very proud of the prompt and unambiguous condemnation of the recent attacks by ZFA president Jeremy Leibler in his letter to acting Lapid: "I condemn outright those that participated in these attacks, as well as those who condone them ... It is completely unacceptable that Jews cannot freely express their Jewish identity in the State of Israel."

I call on all people of faith, conviction and decency to condemn these acts – for if

leaders do not publicly condemn these acts, they are, by their inaction, condoning the vicious attacks on Jews by other Jews.

Masorti (Conservative) and UPJ (Progressive) Australasia also sent a joint letter to the Israeli Prime Minister, stating: "The openly expressed hatred by any stream of Judaism toward another is certainly not that which Jews expect or accept in our Jewish homeland or anywhere."

What else can the Australian Jewish community do?

Jewish communal leaders need to condemn these hateful actions, particularly on Tisha b'Av, calling it out for what it is: שונאת חיים (senseless hatred) and the ugliest form of antisemitism. Our answer in Melbourne is to once again hold a pluralistic Tisha b'Av service for the entire Melbourne Jewish community. Kehilat Nitzan will be hosting this event on Saturday evening, August 6 at 7.30pm, 36-40 Hawthorn Road, Caulfield North, where we will have separate spaces for Orthodox, Masorti (Conservative) and Progressive services, after which we will all come together for a community-wide reading of Eicha (Lamentations) and teachings by rabbis and community leaders on the subject of moving from "Crisis to Regeneration". You are invited to attend this event as a way of showing your support for Klal Yisrael and sending the critical message that we are a united Jewish community.

I would like to echo the words of World Jewish Congress president Ronald S Lauder, who condemned the actions of

protesters last Friday: "I call on the Israeli and Jerusalem authorities to undertake meaningful measures to protect non-Orthodox Jews who wish to pray at the Kotel. The future of the Jewish people is at stake."

The Jewish future is at stake, as Chazal understood the weakness of our people divided at the time of the Second Temple's destruction. Pluralism and religious freedom remain fundamental Jewish values, as pronounced in the Declaration of Independence of the modern-day State of Israel: "The State of Israel ... will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions ..."

We call for the actualisation of this vision of the prophets and of the founders of the State of Israel to ensure that Israel is the home of all Jews. The time has come for the entire Jewish world to demand the implementation of the Kotel plan to create a permanent and pluralistic Kotel with one entrance to different sections (men, women, mixed) representing the practice of all Jewish streams, actualising the vision of the founders of the state who signed the Declaration of Independence.

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